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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000191

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF U/S DEFENSE ERIC  
EDELMAN

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### OVERVIEW

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11. (C) Under Secretary Edelman: Welcome back to Lebanon. Your trip provides another excellent opportunity to reinforce the message of strong U.S. government support for Lebanon. Since your last visit in October 2007, Lebanon has sunk further into a political crisis. There have been more car bomb assassinations and, disturbingly, recent targets have included the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the Internal Security Forces (ISF), and even a U.S. Embassy official vehicle. Parliament has not met in over 16 months. The office of the president has been vacant since November 24th, despite the fact that national and military hero, General Michel Sleiman, emerged as the consensus candidate for the office. The Arab League has been trying to broker a solution (Arab League SYG Amr Moussa arrived in Beirut February 7). Lebanese interlocutors from both the March 14th majority and the March 8th opposition doubt that SYG Moussa's visit will lead to a rapid solution.

12. (C) The pessimism over presidential politics is pervasive in Lebanon and our allies in March 14th continue to live with severe threats to their personal safety. It is more important that ever for the USG to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to Lebanon and its national institutions. Our cooperation with the LAF and other security agencies is a tangible sign of our support. We have been engaged in efforts to improve their ability to maintain internal security and bolster their capabilities along the border with Syria, in compliance with UN Resolution 1701. Support from OSD for the purchased of eight Raven UAVs will greatly enhance our efforts on this front and we ask for your cooperation on this issue. End Summary.  
ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE  
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13. (C) Your visit comes on the heels of SYG Moussa's most recent visit to Beirut. Our Lebanese interlocutors seem to agree that the Arab League Initiative (ALI) is the only game in town in terms of internationally led proposals to end the current deadlock. The problem remains that the Arab foreign ministers approved a document that was vague enough to allow both March 14th and March 8th to interpret the provisions differently. Unless Moussa can de-conflict this matter, which largely revolves around the timing and composition of cabinet appointments, the ALI is unlikely to produce any progress on the ground. Few people actually expect parliament to meet on February 11, the thirteenth scheduled attempt, to elect General Sleiman.

NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS UNDER THREAT

14. (C) Lebanon's adversaries have "upped their game" since your last visit and political violence has taken a disturbing turn. On December 12, Brigadier General Francois Hajj, Chief of Operations for the LAF, was killed by a bomb targeting his vehicle. Thought by many to be the leading candidate for LAF Commander should General Michel Sleiman be elected president, Hajj's murder (though still under investigation) may have been used to intimidate General Sleiman, who had recently been named as March 14th's consensus choice for president. Other theories link Hajj's death to Fatah al-Islam terrorists, whose colleagues he helped to defeat in Nahr al-Barid. In either case, Hajj's death came as a major blow to the country, which had not seen direct attacks on the LAF ) the nation's most powerful and respected national institution, since the Lebanese Civil War.

15. (C) Likewise, the targeting of a U.S. Embassy vehicle by a roadside bomb on the evening of January 15th ushered in a new era of violence not seen in decades. Increased security measures have impacted the ability of all members of the Mission in their ability to fulfill professional obligations outside of the compound.

16. (C) The most recent assassination occurred on January 25th, when Captain Wassid Eid, one of the brightest and most respected intelligence officers in the ISF, was killed. Again, this murder broadened the circle of violence beyond the "typical" anti-Syrian political figures and into the rank and file of one of Lebanon's national institutions.

NEED FOR ADDITIONAL TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR BORDER SECURITY

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17. (C) Progress on the German-led Northern Border Pilot Program has been frustrating to date. Numerous delays, cost overruns, and coordination problems have produced disappointing results for both donors and the Government of Lebanon. Still recovering, in some aspects, from the Nahr-al Barid crisis during the summer of 2007, the 57,000 LAF personnel are stretched thin with responsibilities to guard the country's 450 kilometer border, patrol south Lebanon for the first time in 30 years, and control the perimeters of eleven other Palestinian refugee camps elsewhere in the country. Another potential challenge for the LAF is how to react to destabilizing activities by the Hizballah-led opposition that have produced riots in the streets in recent days and LAF engagement to maintain law and order. With the death of eight protesters and the subsequent after-action accountability investigation, the LAF is feeling more pressure than ever before.

18. (C) Embassy Beirut joins the State Department NEA Bureau, CENTCOM and Joint Staff in recommending the immediate purchase of eight Raven UAVs. Unable to carry ordnance, these UAVs will provide valuable imagery to the LAF and increase its border security capabilities. The LAF has and excellent end use monitoring records and we are confident in their ability to use this commercially available resource in a proper manner.

19. (C) Time is of the essence. Hizballah quietly continues to build its military, communication, economic, and social networks, providing services in the place of the Lebanese state. There are credible reports of factions re-arming during the current presidential vacuum and, as was seen during the recent street riots in Beirut, violence cannot be ruled out. Hizballah already possesses the Iranian-origin Ababil UAVs capable of carrying 40 kilograms of ordnance and boasting greater range, altitude and endurance options than the Raven.

110. (C) We believe that the most rapid way to address any lingering international concerns about this purchase would be to empower the State Department Political Military Bureau to coordinate consultations between the U.S. DAO in Tel Aviv and the Israeli DAO in Washington, per a precedent set by a previous weapons acquisition in recent month. We ask for

your support for this rapid response to an urgent need for border security technical support.

IMPROVED COORDINATION OF EMBASSY EVACUATION CAPABILITIES

¶11. (C) We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for supporting Embassy Beirut's planning process for a future NEO. Since your October visit, we can report regular and productive discussions with military contacts in both EUCOM and DOD. We are working out some final details for the provision of air and sea assets, which were critical in the successful evacuation in 2006 of some 15,000 American citizens. We greatly appreciate your efforts on this issue.

YOUR INTERLOCUTORS

¶12. (C) Prime Minister Siniora has been a good partner to the U.S. However, in recent meetings, he has stressed the need for public USG expressions of long-term support for Lebanon's democracy and national institutions. "I can't do this alone," he has told us. As a former Finance Minister who responds to facts and figures, it is always useful to remind the Prime Minister of USG financial contributions to date.

-- Reiterate strong, unwavering USG support for a strong, democratic government in Lebanon.

-- Provide assurances that we will not trade away our strong support for Lebanon's sovereignty for concessions elsewhere in the region.

-- Emphasize USG desire to see General Sleiman, the March 14th consensus candidate as president in accordance with Lebanese constitutional rules and without conditionality.

-- USG considers a strong, unified LAF to be a key component of Lebanon's democratic struggle for peace and security.

-- Express concern about the implications of the Beirut street riots on January 27 and on-going attacks on the

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Lebanese Army.

-- In the past two years, the USG has provided the LAF with \$321 million in FMF grant (stress "grant") assistance.

¶13. (C) Elias Murr, Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister continues to work closely with us on military cooperation issues. He will likely be your best interlocutor on strategic level concepts and he is extremely knowledgeable.

-- Reiterate strong, unwavering USG support for a strong, democratic government in Lebanon.

-- Provide assurances that we will not trade away our strong support for Lebanon's sovereignty for concessions elsewhere in the region.

-- Emphasize USG desire to see General Sleiman, the March 14th consensus candidate, elected as president in accordance with Lebanese constitutional rules and without conditionality (Murr has been a strong supporter of Sleiman).

-- USG considers a strong, unified LAF to be a key component of Lebanon's democratic struggle for peace and security.

-- Express concern about the implications of the Beirut street riots on January 27 and on-going attacks on the Lebanese Army. What is Murr's assessment of the threat of future violence?

¶14. (C) LAF Commander Sleiman has pleasantly surprised many of his earlier detractors in recent months. During the political turmoil, he has stayed above the fray and continued to act "presidential" with dignity. He has also come to see the light, in some ways, about his former colleagues in the

opposition, pro-Syrian March 8th group. He has been offended by their personal attacks on his candidacy when, only a few short months ago, they were courting him as their own nominee.

-- Reiterate strong, unwavering USG support for a strong, democratic government in Lebanon.

-- USG considers a strong, unified LAF to be a key component of Lebanon's democratic struggle for peace and security.

-- Reiterate SecDef Gates's invitation for Lebanon to send cadets to U.S. service academies. Hope to hear a response on this invitation from Lebanon shortly to meet application deadlines.

-- Express concern about the implications of the Beirut street riots on January 27 and on-going attacks on the Lebanese Army. What is Sleiman's assessment of the threat of future violence?

-- Emphasize USG desire to see you, elected as president in accordance with Lebanese constitutional rules and without conditionality.

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